

## ISSUES IN OLD TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

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The following is, first of all, an attempt to identify the issues which an Old Testament interpreter must face and resolve, either consciously or unconsciously before he begins his interpretive work. Secondly, because it is the writer's conviction that the manner in which the interpreter resolves these questions will have everything to do with his interpretation of Scripture, his own approach to these issues is given. These statements are, because of the necessities of time and space, painfully brief, being more in the nature of conclusions than arguments. This is especially true of the earlier, more philosophical issues. If, however, they cause the reader to reflect upon his own ways of dealing with these questions and how his own answers affect his interpretation, the paper will have achieved its purpose.

There are four major questions with which the prospective interpreter must deal: First, he must ask the nature of reality. He must ascertain the Biblical position on this question and determine whether that position can be accepted at face value, or must be seen as some sort of an accommodation to the weaknesses of the transmitters involved. More than any other, this question and its answers will have a determinative impact upon one's interpretation. The nature of truth, of revelation, of history, all hang in the balance.

Second, he must ask the nature of Scripture. What is the Book he aims to interpret? Largely, the answer here will depend upon the way in which the previous question was answered. Whether one sees the Bible as a Word from God or a witness to such a Word; whether as a divinely-guided compilation of tradition or an inspired self-disclosure of God in

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history, the answers are, in some degree, contingent upon one's view of reality.

Third, he must ask the relation between the Testaments. Before one can speak with any degree of confidence on the meaning of the Old Testament, he must settle in his own mind the significance of the conjoining of Old and New Testaments. Does the New supersede the Old, so that the Old Testament's value is primarily as background? To what extent is it valid to superimpose New Testament insights upon Old Testament narratives? Is the primary purpose of the Old Testament to prophesy Christ? Should the Old Testament be interpreted "alongside" the New, but without letting the New influence one's interpretation of the Old? That there is a relationship is plain. Determining what it is is more difficult.

Fourth, he must ask whether the Old Testament is centered upon some one principle, the relation to which will provide the interpretive key for any given passage. Obviously, it is the relative unity or diversity of the Old Testament which is in question here. If the Old Testament has a central theme, then to miss it is to misinterpret the book. By the same token, if the unity of Scripture is not expressed in one easily definable theme, forcing all passages into some straitjacket is equally damaging.

The following is a presentation of these questions and their auxiliaries in outline form.

- I. The Nature of Reality
- II. The Nature of the Scripture
  - A. Its relation to the revelatory activity of God
  - B. The significance of canon
  - C. The practical effect of a doctrine of inspiration
  - D. The relation of history to the revelatory process
    - 1. Ramifications of historical-critical methodology
    - 2. Progressive revelation
- III. The Relation of the Testaments
  - A. Continuity or discontinuity
  - B. The validity of the promise/fulfillment formula
  - C. The value of analogical (typological) interpretation
- IV. The Question of an Interpretive Principle
- I. The Nature of Reality

As indicated above, this question is fundamental. One cannot interpret the Old Testament until he has evaluated its own view of reality. Is reality solely material, solely spiritual, or some combination

of both? If both, what is the relation between the two? Is reality personal or impersonal? Is nature capable of suspension by something or someone outside of nature (supernature)? These questions cannot be left aside in interpretation any less than in living. They are forced options. The very business of living and interpreting demands that we operate as if certain answers were appropriate. In the final analysis, these decisions, while intellectually supportable, must be primarily volitional (Jn 7:17).

The following is a summarization of the Old Testament conception of reality as the writer understands it. As such, it receives his whole-hearted acceptance. Reality is understood as residing in a Person who transcends His creation, but yet permeates it. He is self-existent and self-consistent. He is capable of revealing Himself and His will to man and has, in fact, done so. He is thus in Himself truth and what He is constitutes all things true. To know Him is to know the truth. Within the creation, the understanding and application of truth will always be more or less relative, because of human frailty, but this is not to say that God's nature and will are relative.

These statements concerning God's absolute reality should not be conceived to mean that the created world is somehow a shadow of His reality. He has bestowed on it His own reality. It is a part of reality, but a contingent part. He is the unconditioned part.

The very uniqueness of this view of reality in the Ancient Near East argues that we are not dealing with simply another variety of speculation. Moreover, the manner in which it carefully balances such imponderables as determinism and responsibility, dignity and creatureliness, spirit and matter, ideal and actual, suggests that despite its transmission through a pre-scientific mentality, it is more in touch with reality than those philosophies which arrogantly restrict their field of vision to sense perception.

## II. The Nature of Scripture

What is the Bible? Is it the approved statement of a people's religious development? Is it a collection of traditions? Is it a document dictated by God to human amanuenses? What is revelation? Event? Word? Both? Is the Biblical consciousness of history accidental or is it related to the very nature of revelation and the Bible? Is its treatment of historical detail trustworthy for the writing of a History of Israel? Or is such treatment most useful for discovering the theological *tendenz* of the various editors of the text? To what extent is the use of historico-critical methodology congruent with the nature of Scripture?

### **The Relation of Scripture (Canon) to the Revelatory Activity of God**

The Bible is not a **result** of God's revelatory activity, it is a **part** of it. As historical event was the vehicle through which God revealed Himself to Israel, so out of the authenticity of those events and that revelation, God reveals Himself to me. The canon records the totality of the events and interpretations through which God has disclosed Himself. As such, each of the separate books partakes of the very nature of revelation. (They are revelation [Word of God] apart from any response, in the same way that the Sinai events **were** revelation even if Moses and the Israelites had dismissed the whole thing as a superb volcanic sideshow.) On this point, see the remarks of Van Ruler, *The Christian Church And The Old Testament*, p. 18ff. This being so, it is possible to speak of those books which deal with less crucial issues without, in so doing, denying them revelatory status. This also means that it is incumbent upon me to probe any book which does not seem to speak to me, in an attempt to see what is its revelatory content.

### **The Practical Effect of a Doctrine to Inspiration**

It is inappropriate to use "tradition" and "inspiration" interchangeably with reference to Scripture. When one, with II Tim. 3:16, affirms that all scripture is *θεοπνευματος*, he is saying at the least that Scripture exists because of God's initiative in its production. This need not necessarily imply that God is the "author" of Scripture (in a "dictation" sense) although such passages as Acts 4:24,25 and 13:34,35 where the Holy Spirit is made the speaker in two quotations from the Psalms, must be kept in mind. More importantly, such a statement implies that Scripture says what God wants it to say concerning His own nature and the nature of His redemptive program. "Tradition," however, normally connotes an absence of a single guiding mind and presupposes a developing community, which somewhat unconsciously shapes and reshapes its literature in the light of its changing consciousness. A tradition is less valuable for the validity of the concepts conveyed than for its insights into the community and its development. For this reason, "tradition" and inspiration seem to be mutually exclusive terms.

### **The Relation of History to the Revelatory Process**

It is self-evident that the Biblical writers understood their God to be revealing Himself in history and the historical process. The very uniqueness of such a view argues for the actuality of the process as the only sufficient cause for the idea. Furthermore, the majority of historians agree that the Biblical view of history is not a product of the West, but

that one of the major factors in the shaping of the Western consciousness has been the Biblical view of history. These being so, any philosophy which denies the possibility of God's acting in history (history being defined as the unfolding story of mankind in the natural, physical universe) cannot be called Biblical. Furthermore, it means that a radically nihilistic attitude toward the historical value of the Biblical accounts is unwarranted. Again, it means that no interpretation has a claim to validity unless it deals with the specific historical milieu into which the revelation first came and makes a serious attempt to see how our altered historical situation affects the meaning of the revelation. (To adopt a methodology which is both soundly historical and soundly critical [analytical] is not to capitulate to the excesses of source—, redaction—, form—, etc., criticism, despite the claims of those who would so indicate.)

This understanding of the Bible as a product of God's acting in, with and upon human history has two further ramifications. It means that the Word of God written is similar in nature to the Word of God incarnate: fully divine and fully human. This means that methodologies developed for the analysis and interpretation of any human literatures are appropriately applied to Scripture (provided that uncontrollable hypotheses concerning sources, etc. are not the primary basis of such methodologies).

Furthermore, since the Biblical conception of history is one of movement (linear, spiral or whatever) toward a goal, the concept of progressive self-disclosure of God in this movement becomes viable. To those like D. Lys (*The Meaning of the Old Testament*) who are troubled by the idea of a revelation which is incomplete prior to Christ, it may be said that even Christ is not the complete (in the sense of total) revelation of God. He is simply the most complete that man in his present state can know. He is totally adequate for God's present purposes with man, however. So each successive revelation in the Old Testament was complete for its purposes, but each supplied a different part of the mosaic until Christ came to supply the central motif.

### III. The Revelation of the Testaments

This question is a very ancient one, for it is obvious that the Old and New Testaments differ widely. Yet Christ and the Apostles and the early church all seem convinced that their identities and the identity of their God were to be found in the Old Testament. Still, granting this, many problems remained. So much so that Marcion advocated playing

the man and jettisoning the Old Testament. The Fathers, while championing the Old Testament, did it no less of a disservice by trying to spiritualize it, which in reality was to de-historicize it. The excesses of their typologies are well known.

Thus, any approach to the relation of the Testaments must bear in mind that the Testaments are not alien to one another. At the same time the distinct contributions of each must not be lost in some process of ameliorizing one to another. The Old Testament's pointing to Christ must not be thought of as its only contribution to the total revelation of God, but at the same time, it is clear that the Church cannot live with any idea that the Old Testament does not lead directly into the New. With these parameters in mind, let us explore these issues more closely.

### **Continuity or Discontinuity**

The Testaments are continuous in the sense that both testify to the continuing creative and redemptive work of God, a process begun in Genesis 1 and prospectively seen as completed in The Revelation 21. The issue is the same throughout Scripture: bringing man to the discovery and experiencing of that for which he was created: life under the Lordship of his Creator. They are continuous in their unified proclamation of God's will for the character of human life. They are continuous in the sense that the new covenant is the logical outcome of the people's failure to keep the Old. (Failure to keep the Old Covenant results in death; in the New Covenant God takes upon Himself the people's consequence and by his own death supplies the blood for the New Covenant ratification [Exodus 24–Mark 14].) They are also continuous in that the New Testament assumes the content of its primary expressions of theology from the Old Testament without question.

The testaments are discontinuous in their historical contexts. Whereas the Old Testament is preparatory and is in primary conflict with Ancient Near Eastern paganism, the New Testament is a successor and is in conflict with the arid legalism which Judaism had become. Thus the Old Testament stresses external conformity and uses coercion to produce this. Elaborate object lessons are made a necessary part of national life. That the object lessons and the external conformity are not conceived of as ends in themselves is clear as early as Deuteronomy (6:4–9; 10:12–22). For the New Testament the issue is an internal obedience for which the Old Testament has created a hunger (Mk. 1, "He will baptize with the Spirit.") and a condemnation of the idolatrous use of the law. The New Testament is not discontinuous in that it contradicts the Old Testament, but in that it goes beyond it and deals with

issues which the Old Testament raises, but cannot answer. To shear the New Testament from the Old Testament is to cut loose the New from its moorings in history and to set it adrift on the sea of subjectivism (*à la* Bultmann). It is to leave the Old Testament as a contradiction to Isaiah: a stump from which no new shoot has burst forth.

### **The Validity of the Promise-Fulfillment Formula**

One scheme under which the Old-New relationship has often been seen is that of promise-fulfillment. While it is obvious that the Biblical writers use this scheme, its validity has been questioned, especially from the Old Testament point of view. This questioning is prompted in part by contextual studies which often suggest that some event much more near at hand than Christ's coming was in the writer's mind.

The question, then is twofold: to what degree are the New Testament writers' understandings imposed on Scripture and to what degree are we justified in following their lead?

If one grants that God can intervene in history and, in fact, has, there is every reason to suppose that He has shaped Scripture according to His purposes, as it claims. To ask how Isaiah understood his fifty-third chapter is thus not the only relevant question. How did God intend it? This is not to say that Isaiah necessarily pictured Jesus of Nazareth when he wrote the chapter nor to say that it does not have reference to God's expectations for the Jewish people. It is to say that what the chapter is talking about finds its finest flower in Jesus Christ, who is indeed all that the people of Israel might have been, but never became. This is not to say that the function of the Old Testament is to provide riddles for New Testament answers. It is to say that the New Testament understanding of the Incarnation as the (as opposed to an) appropriate keeping of God's promises is correct and we now, knowing how God chose to keep His promises, are justified in searching the Old Testament to see in what ways this new development illuminates His earlier activities.

### **The Value of Analogical Interpretation**

The above statement applies generally to analogical (typological) interpretation. Obviously, permitting this kind of method opens the door for imaginative inferences which do harm to the meaning of the text. On the other hand, to deny that there is a possible analogy between God's revelations to the people of the Old Testament and to those of the New while maintaining that such an analogy does exist between the Biblical text and the present seems arbitrary and inconsistent. Furthermore, granting the possibility of progressive revelation, one may very

well miss the full implication of a certain text by failing to compare other aspects of the revelation. He who will perform each of the three interpretive tasks honestly and rigorously (What does it say? What did it say to its first hearers? What does it say today?) need not easily fall into distorted and perverted interpretations. He who slights analogical interpretation may well find himself preaching a "history of religions" gospel, wherein the only value of past religions is a historical one.

#### IV. The Validity of a Single Interpretive Principle

Is there one principle by which the interpreter can infallibly discover what is the central content of any passage in the Old Testament?

This intriguing question has occupied much scholarly attention over the years. Especially when the unity of the Old Testament under a single divine "author" was stressed, such a principle was to be expected as a matter of course. However, the diversity of the books found in the Old Testament has not been capable of being put down. It is hard to see much in common between Ecclesiastes and Ruth for example, unless one descends to some "least common denominator" like "Fear God." So the search has gone on, fed by the conviction of fundamental unity, troubled by the data of, at least external, diversities.

Several principles have been proposed during the Christian era. Perhaps the oldest is the "Spiritual Sense" arrived at by means of allegorical methodology. Luther's was the Christological arrived at by means of the historical/critical and/or typological methodology. Eichrodt proposed covenant. Van Ruler has proposed kingdom. Students of W.F. Albright have proposed a method which is a principle: Biblical Theology. Brevard Childs, while scoring the weaknesses of this approach, is nonetheless still to be found within it.

The total disregard of spiritualizing exegesis for the historical context into which the revelation came has long since disqualified this principle. Likewise, Wright and others have recently criticized Luther's "Christomonism" as reconstituted by Barth, pointing out that movement is in precisely the wrong direction. Whereas our concept of Christ needs to be informed by the overarching concept of Yahweh, in fact, the concept of Yahweh is forced into the mold of Christ.

Van Ruler's idea of kingdom is attractive, particularly since it moves so well into the New Testament, thus correcting the misdirection noted above. So also Eichrodt's idea of Covenant. These single principles have the advantage of providing an organizing motif around which to group the diversities of the Old Testament. They have the disadvantage of tending to suppress these diversities (which is precisely the accusation



leveled by Barr<sup>1</sup> against Wright, et. al.) On the other hand, the very fact that these diverse writings are together in the canon suggests an underlying unity. Thus an attempt to understand whether they do speak a unified word is justifiable. It is at this point that a Biblical Theology seems to be the appropriate principle/method of interpretation.

It is understood that a passage must be interpreted first within its own literary context and historical milieu. However, those who accept this principle refuse to believe that the books of the Old Testament are together by chance. Rather they see the whole process of canonization as a recognition that there is a fundamental unity among these writings. This being so, one is justified in interpreting the passage in successively wider contexts, gauging its meaning in terms of that concept of God and His work which informs the whole. Finally, then one can only say what a passage means in the context of the whole Scripture.

Obviously, in the course of the centuries there have been many systems of interpretation proposed. This variety ought to provoke in the modern day interpreter a certain humility concerning the eternality of any systems to which he might come. However, he ought never to mistake diffidence for humility. Diffidence will be manifested in an unwillingness to take a stand, to commit oneself to any point of view. Humility will contend most ardently for its case, but will be free to admit that other points of view are conceivable and that their proponents are not, as a matter of course, morally reprehensible.

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<sup>1</sup>James Barr, "Revelation Through History in the Old Testament and in Modern Theology," *New Theology*, no. 1, ed. M Marty and D. Peerman (New York: the Macmillan Co., 1964), pp. 60–74 (and elsewhere).